

VZCZCXYZ0023  
RR RUEHWEB

DE RUEHBO #2091/01 1621853  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
R 101853Z JUN 08  
FM AMEMBASSY BOGOTA  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 3112  
INFO RUEHCV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS 0519  
RUEHPE/AMEMBASSY LIMA 6253  
RUEHLP/AMEMBASSY LA PAZ JUN QUITO 6925  
RUEHZP/AMEMBASSY PANAMA 1831  
RUEHBR/AMEMBASSY BRASILIA 8230  
RUEHMU/AMEMBASSY MANAGUA 2268

UNCLAS BOGOTA 002091

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [ECON](#) [SOCI](#) [EAIR](#) [EFIS](#) [EAGR](#) [PBTS](#) [SENV](#) [SNAR](#) [TINT](#)  
CO

SUBJECT: SAN ANDRES: COLOMBIA'S CARIBBEAN PARADISE BANKS ON  
TOURISM

REF: 07 BOGOTA 8592

¶1. SUMMARY: San Andres, Colombia's Caribbean island paradise, makes a living on tourists who come for the sun, sand, surf and shopping. The island hosts over a thousand visitors daily and looks to increase the number with increased domestic visibility, a new convention center, five-star hotel, and a renovated airport. With the territorial dispute with Nicaragua all but resolved, the small Colombian outpost is now turning its attention to the complexities shared widely by its island neighbors, including tension between locals and mainlanders, unemployment and crime. END SUMMARY

Pirates of the Caribbean  
-----

¶2. (SBU) Located almost 500 miles from mainland Colombia, but only 150 miles off the Nicaraguan coast, the 15 square mile island of San Andres with 90,000 inhabitants serves as the capital for Colombia's San Andres and Providencia Department. Governor Pedro Gallardo Forbes told econoff that San Andres is now undeniably part of Colombia since the 2007 decision by the International Court of Justice means the end of Nicaraguan claims to the islands of San Andres and Providencia, although the ownership of some smaller islands in the archipelago and the precise maritime border remain uncertain. He also called the idea floated by some locals that the Department should try to become an independent country "a fantasy."

¶3. Native San Andrean "Raizales" call their island "blessed," pointing to its' pristine beaches, large coral reef and near-perfect weather. Chamber of Commerce President Larry Zogby, however, called the island's duty free port status something of a mixed blessing. While it permits inexpensive imports on twice-weekly boats from Miami and Panama, the island now has so many cars that many complain of traffic jams. Governor Gallardo recently banned the import of new vehicles unless the owner can show they destroyed their old one.

¶4. No official definition of "Raizales" exists, but it commonly refers to those who have lived in the islands for multiple generations, come from a mixed Afro-Caribbean/European heritage, often have English surnames, and speak English as a first language (although the influx of mainlanders in recent years means that Spanish has become more prevalent). Raizales proudly point to "Henry Morgan's Cave" as proof of their buccaneer background. Locals note that smuggling duty-free U.S. electronics and appliances from San Andres to the mainland, which constituted one of the main sources of income until the early 1990s,

simply represented a continuation of their pirate heritage.

Tourism, Tourism, Tourism  
-----

15. (SBU) Zogby described the island's future as "tourism, tourism, tourism." He noted that the number of visitors increased by over 30 percent between 2001 to 2007, from 315,000 to 420,000. Zogby said tourism now employs virtually the entire private sector workforce. While some tourists still come for the shopping, as attested to by dozens of duty-free perfume and liquor stores along the new mile-long boardwalk, Zogby called sand, sun, and surf the main attractions. He noted that the number of tourist related businesses increased over the past few years, and expects the trend to continue. UNESCO's designation of San Andres as a Biosphere Reserve in 2000 boosted tourism by raising the island's international profile, and Zogby expects the island's domestic visibility to get a similar bump when it hosts the national baseball, soccer and basketball championships this November in a new, USD 3 million, sports center. He added that the anticipated USD 12 million fiber optic sub-sea cable from Nicaragua, which should be functioning in 2009, will increase connectivity for the island's businesses and reduce internet costs by 70 percent.

16. (SBU) Department Minister of Planning Claudia Cifuentes acknowledged tourism's importance, but warned it had to be balanced against environmental protection. Cifuentes said a 15-year court-ordered building moratorium based on insufficient water, electricity and sewage infrastructure,

could soon be lifted since public facilities are now in much better condition. However, without the moratorium Cifuentes said the government would probably maintain a ban on new construction within 100 feet of the shore. She added that with 7,500 available hotel rooms, the government looks to improve the quality of new facilities rather than simply build more rooms. She pointed to a plan to build a USD 6 million convention center and adjoining five-star hotel within the next year as the type of development the government hopes to promote.

17. Airport General Manager Ramon Emiliani told econoff that 25 percent of the tourists who visited San Andres in 2007 were from outside Colombia. Emiliani expects overall growth to continue at 5-10 percent annually, and at a greater clip for international visitors, many who travel to the less developed island of Providencia. Twice weekly charter flights from Montreal and Toronto bring Canadian visitors during the winter season, and Emiliani expressed hope that U.S. carriers may take advantage of the opportunity for direct charter flights under the new U.S.-Colombia civil aviation agreement (reftel). Emiliani said the airport will undergo a USD 45 million renovation over the next five years which will improve baggage handling and expand the runway and terminal building.

Trouble in Paradise?  
-----

18. (SBU) Governor Gallardo described San Andres' three biggest problems as: 1) tension with mainlanders who move to the island for work; 2) crime; and 3) unemployment. Gallardo said the 90,000 islanders divide evenly among three groups: 1) Raizales; 2) Residents born in San Andres but with mainland parents; and 3) mainlanders recently arrived seeking employment. While Raizales and residents generally get along well, Gallardo said both groups sometimes resent newcomers who work for low salaries, care less about maintaining the environment, and are more likely to get into trouble. Newcomers cannot, at least in theory, obtain a residency permit to work unless their job has been certified as critical. Gallardo admitted that the government has been lax in enforcing this law. The fact that outsiders own most large hotels exacerbates the tension.

19. (SBU) Gallardo called unemployment, estimated at 30

percent, a chronic problem. He said Raizales constituted the bulk of the unemployed, particularly artisanal fishermen. Department Minister of Fisheries and Agriculture Marcos Robinson noted that San Andres used to export fish, lobster, and conch, but that overfishing and rising fuel costs collapsed the industry. Robinson blamed overfishing mainly on illegal poachers from other countries. Governor Gallardo said he hopes to develop a "Marine Guardians" program to help protect the Department's territorial waters (the boundaries of which were not resolved by the International Court of Justice decision) and employ out-of-work fishermen. Robinson also noted that while San Andres historically exported fruits and vegetables, they now import for local consumption and the tourist market with shipping costs typically doubling costs. Robinson hopes to expand agricultural production, particularly of tropical fruits such as pineapple, papaya, mangos and bananas, to help meet tourist demand and boost employment.

¶10. (SBU) Gallardo said petty crime and delinquent gangs were on the rise, and blamed unemployment and drugs. While petty crime has not yet affected tourism, Gallardo worried that it could. Gallardo has partnered with the national government's social agency, Accion Social, to develop rehabilitation programs for delinquents. Admiral Henry Blain, Commander of the Department's naval forces, described San Andres as a transit point for narcotics. He said boats carrying drugs from Colombia sometimes rendezvous on the high seas with locals who supply them with fuel in exchange for cash or drugs. Blain believes his forces detection and interception abilities have improved, but said patrolling the Department's 100,000 square miles of territorial waters remains a challenge.

BROWNFIELD